

## HOUSE PANEL REJECTS DEMOCRATIC PUSH FOR INFO ON CHENEY'S ENERGY TASK FORCE

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by Ben Geman - Environment and Energy Daily

The House Energy & Commerce Committee yesterday squelched a Democratic push for information about the inner workings of Vice President Dick Cheney's controversial energy policy task force in a hearing that dissolved into accusations of Democratic grandstanding and GOP abuse of power.

The committee, on a party line vote, defeated a so-called resolution of inquiry sponsored by three senior Democrats that sought the names of those who met with task force members, the date, subject and location of each meeting, and other information. The task force produced the White House's 2001 national energy strategy.

The committee chair did not allow debate on the resolution, H.Res. 745, dismissing it as an effort to attack the White House heading into the election, and a distraction from congressional efforts to craft energy policy. The resolution is a "purely political ploy," said committee Chairman Rep. Joe Barton (R-Texas).

Barton enraged Democrats by deciding not to allow any members other than Dingell to make opening statements and not allowing any debate on the resolution, or amendments aimed at reporting the measure favorably from the committee. "This whole committee is a farce," said Rep. Henry Waxman (D-Calif.), one of the measure's sponsors, as he walked out before the final 30-22 vote defeating the resolution.

Barton repeatedly prevented Democrats from speaking when they attempted to offer criticisms under the guise of "parliamentary inquiry," with Barton calling the inquiries invalid. "You want to shut down democracy here," said Rep. Janice **Schakowsky** (D-Ill.), who tried to inquire as to why Barton had "shut down debate." Barton said her inquiry was not valid after GOP members jeered that she was out of order.

Barton's refusal to allow debate left Democrats making very critical comments as they cast votes against the GOP motion to report the measure unfavorably. For instance, during a roll call, Rep. Ed Markey (D-Mass) said he was "voting no to the secrecy of the Cheney energy task force." Markey was one of the resolution's sponsors.

But prior to the hearing, Barton defended the process behind Cheney's private meetings, explaining that the energy policy the White House developed is more important than who administration officials met with to develop it. "I think the results of the deliberation needed to be made public and they were," he told reporters.

Barton was pressed to hold the markup because if he had not acted upon the resolution within 14 legislative days of its introduction, it would have been "privileged" and thus any member could have called for a House vote on it.

Barton said he has attempted to allow an open process on congressional energy policy development, noting in his opening statement, for instance, that the subcommittee on energy and air quality held 35 hearings on energy policy when he chaired the panel.

Yet Dingell said that unsuccessful litigation by the General Accounting Office -- now called the Government Accountability Office -- seeking information about the task force had left it up to Congress to determine who the body met with. He decried "secretive practices which deny the public the right to know and understand what their government is doing for them or to them," and called the information request reasonable.

"This is not the solicitation of the membership of al-Qaida," he said.

Democrats blasted Barton's decision not to allow debate in a press conference after the hearing. "What we saw today was a corruption of democracy," Markey said. "Today Vladimir Putin is taking notes on how to run a government in Russia."

Environmentalists and congressional critics of administration energy policy have long believed the task force was heavily influenced by energy industry officials and that the 2001 White House energy policy it produced rests too heavily on expanded fossil fuel development.

Environmental and government watchdog groups long have charged the records would show how oil, gas, nuclear and coal industry officials exerted undue influence on the Bush administration's energy policy. The White House has acknowledged that Cheney met with executives of now-bankrupt Enron Corp. at least five times but blocked disclosure of other participants citing presidential privacy and other legal grounds.

Watchdog groups have also sought access to the task force records through the courts. The Supreme Court ruled in June that Cheney does not have to disclose information about the meetings until a lower court reviews the case.